

D-125
Joseph Johnson's Tavern
Reliance
1821-22, 1885
Private

The two-story, five-bay frame house that occupies the northwest corner of the Reliance crossroads a few yards west of the Maryland/Delaware state line has exterior surface finishes that suggest a third quarter of the nineteenth century date of construction, however, a close inspection of the interior and underfloor framing in the crawl space indicates that an early 19th century frame structure is hidden behind the later siding. This analysis, when coupled with the chain-of-title and other research, confirms a construction date in 1821-22 that was followed by a heavy reworking of the tavern in 1885. The original features inside the house include two door surround moldings, one around the front door and another around a second floor chamber door, as well as thick and wide dimensioned yellow pine flooring on the first, second, and attic floor levels. The standing framework of the house rests on a heavy dimensioned hand-hewn sill, and large sized oak joists stretch from front to back. There is a significantly wide gap in the hewn sill on the south gable end indicating the former size of the exterior brick chimney stack that once dominated this elevation. The fabric evidence places the original structure within the ownership of Joseph Johnson, who operated a roadside tavern at this site and assisted his mother-in-law, Patty Cannon, and others in an illicit trade in free blacks and slaves during the early 19th century. Patty Cannon purchased the property from her son-in-law in 1826, and she used this location as well as a second house across the state line in her criminal activities until she was apprehended in 1829.

The 116 square perch lot on the northwest corner of the Reliance crossroads was acquired by Sussex County, Delaware resident Joseph Johnson from James Wilson for \$150 in July 1821, and he financed construction of the large two-story, five-bay frame tavern on the site shortly afterwards. Identified in the land records as part of "Wilson's Plain Dealing" and located at "Wilson's Crossroads," the property soon became his official residence, which is documented in the Dorchester County land records as occurring on October 10, 1822. The land record is principally a certificate of ownership of a 9-year old house servant, Margaretta. The tavern Joseph Johnson financed was a substantial two-story, five-bay timber frame structure dominated by a full two-story porch across the east elevation and a large, double shouldered brick chimney that rose against the south gable end.

Joseph Johnson's mother-in-law, Patty [Martha] Cannon purchased the tavern and lot for \$1,000 in March 1826 indicating the value of the property and its substantial improvement. Three years later, Patty Cannon was apprehended for crimes of murder and kidnapping, for which she was jailed in Georgetown, Delaware. She died in her prison cell on May 11, 1829. Afterwards the Johnson tavern property was confiscated and sold a year later by Dorchester sheriff Nathaniel Applegarth to General Jesse Green of Sussex County for \$207.

During the late 19th century, the old Johnson tavern was cited in George Alfred Townsend's romantic novel, *The Entailed Hat*, and he included a sketch of the building as it appeared in the early 1880s. A few years later, J. Thomas Sharf wrote in his voluminous *History of Delaware*, published in 1888, "In 1885 this structure was entirely rebuilt by C.M. Phillips, who owned the property, and its attractive appearance gives

little evidence of the fact that it stands on the site of the infamous old prison pen." True to this statement is the late 19th century nature of the center staircase of turned work as well as the medium pitched roof with extended eaves and returns.

For sixty years, between the late 1820s and the early 1880s, the original Wilson's Crossroads was supplanted by "Johnson's Crossroads," but in 1882, the name was changed to Reliance by postmaster and storekeeper Charles M. Phillips. In 1895, in the wake of a Dorchester County court chancery case, the Phillips house and store were sold to Charlotte F. Smith for \$1,150. The property remained under Phillips family tenure until the late 1960s.

Maryland Historical Trust

Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form

Inventory No. D-125

1. Name of Property

(indicate preferred name)

historic Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
other "Wilson's Plain Dealing"

2. Location

street and number 6070 Reliance Road not for publication
city, town Reliance vicinity
county Dorchester

3. Owner of Property

(give names and mailing addresses of all owners)

name John H. and Rosalie A. Messick
street and number 6070 Reliance Road telephone
city, town Federalsburg state MD zip code 21632

4. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Dorchester County Clerk of Court liber PLC 221 folio 673
city, town Cambridge tax map 16 tax parcel 31 tax ID number 01-003917

5. Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☐ Contributing Resource in National Register District
☐ Contributing Resource in Local Historic District
☐ Determined Eligible for the National Register/Maryland Register
☐ Determined Ineligible for the National Register/Maryland Register
☐ Recorded by HABS/HAER
☐ Historic Structure Report or Research Report at MHT
☐ Other:

6. Classification

Category	Ownership	Current Function	Resource Count
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	Contributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce/trade	1
<input type="checkbox"/> site		<input type="checkbox"/> recreation/culture	1
<input type="checkbox"/> object		<input type="checkbox"/> defense	
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> domestic	
		<input type="checkbox"/> education	
		<input type="checkbox"/> funerary	1
		<input type="checkbox"/> government	1
		<input type="checkbox"/> health care	
		<input type="checkbox"/> industry	
		<input type="checkbox"/> religion	
		<input type="checkbox"/> social	
		<input type="checkbox"/> transportation	
		<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	
		<input type="checkbox"/> unknown	
		<input type="checkbox"/> vacant/not in use	
		<input type="checkbox"/> other:	
			Number of Contributing Resources previously listed in the Inventory

7. Description

Inventory No. D-125

Condition

<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> altered

Prepare both a one paragraph summary and a comprehensive description of the resource and its various elements as it exists today.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The former Johnson tavern or the Patty Cannon house, also known as the C. M. Phillips house, stands on the northwest corner of the intersection of the Reliance Crossroads west of Seaford, Sussex County, Delaware. The house stands a few hundred feet west of the Maryland/Delaware line at 6070 Reliance Road, Dorchester County, Maryland. The house faces east with the principal gable roof oriented on a north/south axis. Built in several stages, the structure frame of the house dates to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, whereas periodic modifications were made around 1880 and during the mid to late 20th century. Joining the house on the lot is a single story gable roofed garage dating from the mid to late 20th century.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Supported on a low brick foundation covered with a layer of artificial veneer brick, the two-story, five-bay, center hall plan frame house clearly dates to the first quarter of the 19th century (c. 1810) and was heavily remodeled with new windows and a restyled roof during the fourth quarter of the 19th century (c. 1880). Periodic remodeling efforts during the mid to late 19th century have removed or covered up most of the historic woodwork original to the 19th century structure. The exterior of by five-bay by two-bay frame dwelling is sheathed with vinyl siding and the medium pitched roof is covered with asphalt shingles. Attached to the north gable end of the house is a single-story three-bay wing dating to the late 19th century.

The east (main) elevation is a symmetrical five-bay elevation with a center entrance and flanking six-over-six sash windows. The front door is partially glazed and is topped by a four-light transom. The adjacent window openings are framed by narrow surrounds finished with a slight corner bead and a later ogee backband. The first floor is sheltered by a single-story porch that has been rebuilt during the mid 20th century. The second story is defined by five evenly spaced six-over-six sash windows. Trimming the base of the roof is a boxed cornice enhanced with a ogee profile crown molding.

The south gable end is defined by two six-over-six sash windows on each floor, and two four-pane windows light the attic. The edge of the roof is finished with an extended eave that terminate on the lower corners with returns. There is no chimney stack surviving however there is evidence in the crawl space of a large interior end chimney stack. The evidence underneath the house points clearly to an early 19th century date of construction with a massive hewn sill and large oak floor joists that support an original yellow pine floor.

The back of the house that faces west is partially covered by a two-part rear wing built during the late 20th century. The west wall of the main block is defined by a few six-over-six sash windows that light the first and second stories.

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The north gable end is partially covered by the single-story gable roofed wing. The only defining feature of the north gable end of the main block is a single six-over-six sash window on the second story. The edge of the roof is finished with an extended eave with returns.

The single-story gable end wing has been remodeled along with the main block. The east elevation is a three-bay façade with a center entrance and flanking six-over-six sash windows. The window trim retains Victorian era shutter hardware. Attached to the north gable end is an exterior brick chimney erected during the late 20th century.

The interior of the main block has been extensively reworked, however there are a few indications of an early 19th century date to the original house. The front door opening is framed by an three-part molded surround with a ogee profile backband that rises from a plinth block common to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The center hall is dominated by a late 19th century turned baluster staircase featuring a turned newel post and molded handrail common to post Civil War dwellings. An earlier occupant of the house claimed to have had evident the staircase was positioned in the opposite direction, but evidence to support this statement was not found. The staircase is however a feature that dates to the late 19th century. The rooms to each side of the center hall are stripped of any historic woodwork. The doors and window openings are framed by clam shell type moldings. The floor is laid in narrow tongue-and-groove oak.

The second story is likewise reworked with few references to the early 19th century date of the house. One surviving element is an identical three-part door surround to the north bedroom door that repeats the same molding as that which is found around the front door. At the head of the second floor landing, in a small closet, is an exposed section of wide yellow pine flooring typical of the early 19th century. The floor has been raised approximately eight inches through the hall and within the room(s) to the north. There are two simply finished rooms to the south of the second floor hall.

Access into the attic revealed that the early 19th century yellow pine floor remains although the roof frame has been rebuilt during the late 19th century.

8. Significance

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Period	Areas of Significance	Check and justify below		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> health/medicine	<input type="checkbox"/> performing arts
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> invention	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-1999	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment/ recreation	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 2000-	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> ethnic heritage	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/ settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> social history
	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning		<input type="checkbox"/> maritime history	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation		<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____

Specific dates

Architect/Builder

Construction dates

Evaluation for:

☐ National Register

☐ Maryland Register

☒ not evaluated

Prepare a one-paragraph summary statement of significance addressing applicable criteria, followed by a narrative discussion of the history of the resource and its context. (For compliance projects, complete evaluation on a DOE Form – see manual.)

SUMMARY SIGNIFICANCE

The two-story, five-bay frame house that occupies the northwest corner of the Reliance crossroads a few yards west of the Delaware state line has exterior surface finishes that suggest a third quarter of the 19th century date of construction, however, a close inspection of the interior and underfloor framing in the crawl space indicates that an early 19th century frame structure, built around 1820, was reworked heavily around 1880 with a reworking of the roof and replacement of the windows and the installation of a new staircase. Two door surround moldings, one around the front door and another around a second floor chamber door, clearly date to the early 19th century with its characteristic three-part molding and ogee profile backband. Thick and wide dimensioned yellow pine flooring on the first, second, and attic floor levels indicates a date consistent with the remnant woodwork. The standing framework of the house rests on a heavy dimensioned, hand adzed sill, and large size oak floor joists stretch from front to back. There is a large gap in the hewn sill on the south gable end indicating the former size of the exterior brick chimney stack that once dominated this elevation. The fabric evidence places the original structure within the ownership of Joe Johnson, who operated a roadside tavern at this site and assisted his mother-in-law, Patty Cannon, in an illicit trade in free blacks and slaves during the early 19th century. Patty Cannon purchased the property from her son-in-law in 1826, and she used this location as well as a second house across the state line in her criminal activities until she was apprehended in 1829.

HISTORY AND SUPPORT

The 116 square perch lot on the northwest corner of the Reliance crossroads was acquired by Sussex County, Delaware resident Joseph Johnson from James Wilson for \$150 in July 1821,¹ and he financed construction of a large two-story, five-bay frame tavern on the site shortly afterwards. Identified as

¹ Dorchester County Land Record, ER 8/147, 14 July 1821, Dorchester County Courthouse.

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Continuation Sheet

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part of "Wilson's Plain Dealing" and located at "Wilson's Crossroads," the property soon became the center of an illegal trade in kidnapped free blacks and slaves conducted by Joe Johnson, his mother-in-law Patty Cannon and their gang. Joseph Johnson official relocation to Dorchester County is recorded in the Dorchester County land records on October 10, 1822 along with a certificate of ownership of a 9-year old house servant, Margaretta.² The tavern Joe Johnson financed was a substantial two-story, five-bay timber frame structure dominated by a full two-story porch across the east elevation and a large exterior brick chimney that rose on the south gable end. Structural evidence and finish features inside the house confirm that this structure is the Johnson tavern, which was purchased by his mother-in-law Patty Cannon in March 1826 for \$1000.³ In 1829 Patty Cannon was apprehended for crimes of murder and kidnapping, for which she was jailed in Georgetown, Delaware where she died on May 11, 1829.⁴ The property was confiscated and sold a year later by Dorchester sheriff Nathaniel Applegarth to General Jesse Green of Sussex County for \$207.00.⁵

During the late 19th century, the old Johnson tavern building was used by George Alfred Townsend in his romantic novel *The Entailed Hat*, and he included an engraving of the building as it appeared in the early 1880s.⁶ A few years later, J. Thomas Sharf, wrote in his voluminous *History of Delaware*, published in 1888, "In 1885 this structure was entirely rebuilt by C.M. Phillips, who owned the property, and its attractive appearance gives but little evidence of the fact that it stands on the site of the infamous old prison pen."⁷ True to this statement is the late 19th century character of the interior staircase and the medium pitched roof with extended eaves and returns at that base of the roof.

For sixty years, between the late 1820s and the early 1880s, the original Wilson's Crossroads was supplanted by "Johnson's Crossroads," but in 1882 the name was changed to Reliance by postmaster and storekeeper Charles M. Phillips.⁸ In 1895, as a result of a chancery case in Dorchester County court, the Phillips house and store were sold to Charlotte F. Smith for \$1,150.⁹ The property remained under Phillips family tenure until the late 1960s.¹⁰

² Dorchester County Land Record, ER 8/516, 25 November 1822, Dorchester County Courthouse.

³ Dorchester County Land Record, ER 10/205, 1 March 1826, Dorchester County Courthouse.

⁴ Ted Giles, *Patty Cannon: Woman of Mystery*, Easton, Md: Easton Publishing Co., 1965.

⁵ Dorchester County Land Record, ER 12/4, 22 April 1830, Dorchester County Courthouse.

⁶ George Alfred Townsend, *The Entailed Hat*. Cambridge, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1955 [Reprint]. p. 298.

⁷ J. Thomas Sharf, *History of Delaware, 1609-1888*. Philadelphia: L. J. Richards & Co., 1888, [Reprint by Family Line Publications, 1990] p. 1306.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dorchester County Land Record, CL 19/563, 5 June 1895, Dorchester County Courthouse.

¹⁰ Dorchester County Land Record, 156/226, 16 June 1968, Dorchester County Courthouse.

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Continuation Sheet

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Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
6070 Reliance Road
Reliance, Dorchester County, Maryland

Chain of title
Map 16, Parcel 31

PLC 221/673

Peoples Bank of Maryland

to

1.19.1982

John H. Messick and Rosalie A. Messick

2.34 acres

220/346

Starke M. Evans, Assignee

to

9.15.1981

The Peoples Bank of Maryland

Whereas property was owned by Samuel A. Good, sold at public
Auction, 7.22.1981

200/202

Mary E. Handy

to

5.20.1977

James A. Good

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156/226

Hazel Phillips Smith
Harold H. Smith

to

6.16.1968

Mary E. Handy, Sussex Co., Delaware

PLC 154/513

Harold H. Smith, Clara Grace Smith, Ancillary
Administrators of Last Will and Testament of A. Hill Smith

to

1.27.1968

Hazel Phillips Smith

RPS 3/214

Last Will and Testament of Charlotte F. Smith

to

7.22.1920

Albert Hill Smith

CL 19/563

John R. Pattison, Trustee

to

6.5.1895

Charlotte F. Smith

\$1,150.00 Chancery Case No. 1885, being the residence
and home place of the said Mary O. Phillips and husband

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Name Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
Continuation Sheet

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2 acres, 3 roods, 4 square perches
2nd, all that lot of land with a store house thereon, situated
at Reliance and recently occupied by said Mary O. Phillips

62 square perches

CL 13/250

Edward Adams and Celia E. Adams

to

11.16.1889

Mary O. Phillips

\$1,400.00

CL 3/557-59

Charles M. Phillips

to

6.25.1881

Edward Adams

\$1,600 "in the vilage (sic) of Johnson's Crossroads"

"Wilson's Plain Dealing"

Break in Chain-of-title

ER 12/4

Nathaniel Applegarth, Sheriff of Dorchester County

to

4.22.1830

General Jesse Green of Sussex County

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Name Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
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Number 8 Page 5

Witnesseth that the said Nathaniel Applegarth, Sheriff as aforesaid for and in consideration of the sum of two hundred and seven dollars....this Indenture and in pursuance and by virtue of the writ of fieri facias herein after mentioned hath given granted....unto the said Jesse Green...the house and lot where Patty Cannon lately resided, being part of a tract of land lying and being in Dorchester County called Willson's Plain Dealing containing three quarters of an acre of land more or less seized and taken in execution by virtue of a writ of fieri facias issued out of Dorchester County Court in the name Benjamin Melson use of Jacob Cannon against the said Patty Cannon and sold to the said Jesse Green as will more fully appear by reference to the said writ of fieri facias and the special return thereto annexed and filed in the Clerk's office at the October Term of the same court in the year of our Lord 1829

ER 10/205

Joseph Johnson and Ebenezer Johnson

to

3.1.1826

Martha Cannon, widow of Jesse Cannon, deceased of
Sussex County, Delaware

"Wilson's Plain Dealing" on the road from Willson's (sic) Cross
Roads to Northwest Fork Bridge"

\$1,000 116 perches "...all that tract or part of a tract or parcel of land situate lying and being in Dorchester County & State of Maryland called Willson's Plain Dealing beginning at a forked red hart cherry tree standing on the south west side of the county road leading from Willson's Cross roads to N.W. Fork bridge....

ER 8/516

Joseph Johnson, lately of Sussex Co., Delaware

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Name Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
Continuation Sheet

Number 8 Page 6

11.25.1822

I Joseph Johnson, lately of Sussex County in the State of Delaware are having on 10 day of October 1822 unto the State of Maryland with the intent to reside in Dorchester County... and having brought with me a negro girl a slave belonging to me viz Margaretta, about 9 years of age, she being intended by me as a house servant and not for sale....

ER 8/147

James Willson (sic) of Dorchester

to

7.14.1821

Joseph Johnson of Sussex Co., Delaware

116 square perches of Wilson's Plain Dealing \$150.00

ER 6/145

William Russell of Dorchester County

to

12.8.1819

Joseph Johnson

ER 6/145

Negro Mary, aged 24 years
William Russell

to

12.8.1819

Joseph Johnson

Negro girl Sall, aged 12 years

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Name Johnson's Tavern, Patty Cannon House
Continuation Sheet

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ER 6/146

William Russell

to

12.8.1819

Joseph Johnson

Negro man

ER 6/146

William Russell

to

12.8.1819

Joseph Johnson

Negro Stephen, aged 22

9. Major Bibliographical References

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Dorchester County Land Records, various volumes, Dorchester County Courthouse.

Personal Interview with Jack Messick, 10.21.08

Sharf, J. Thomas. *History of Delaware, 1609-1888*. Vol. II. Philadelphia: L. J. Richards & Co. 1888, p. 1306.

Townsend, George Alfred. *The Entailed Hat*. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, [Reprint, 1955] p. 298.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of surveyed property .75 acre

Acreage of historical setting .75 acre

Quadrangle name Seaford West, Del.-Md. 1955

Quadrangle scale: 1:24,000

Verbal boundary description and justification

The metes and bounds of this surveyed property are coincidental with the current boundary of the lot.

11. Form Prepared by

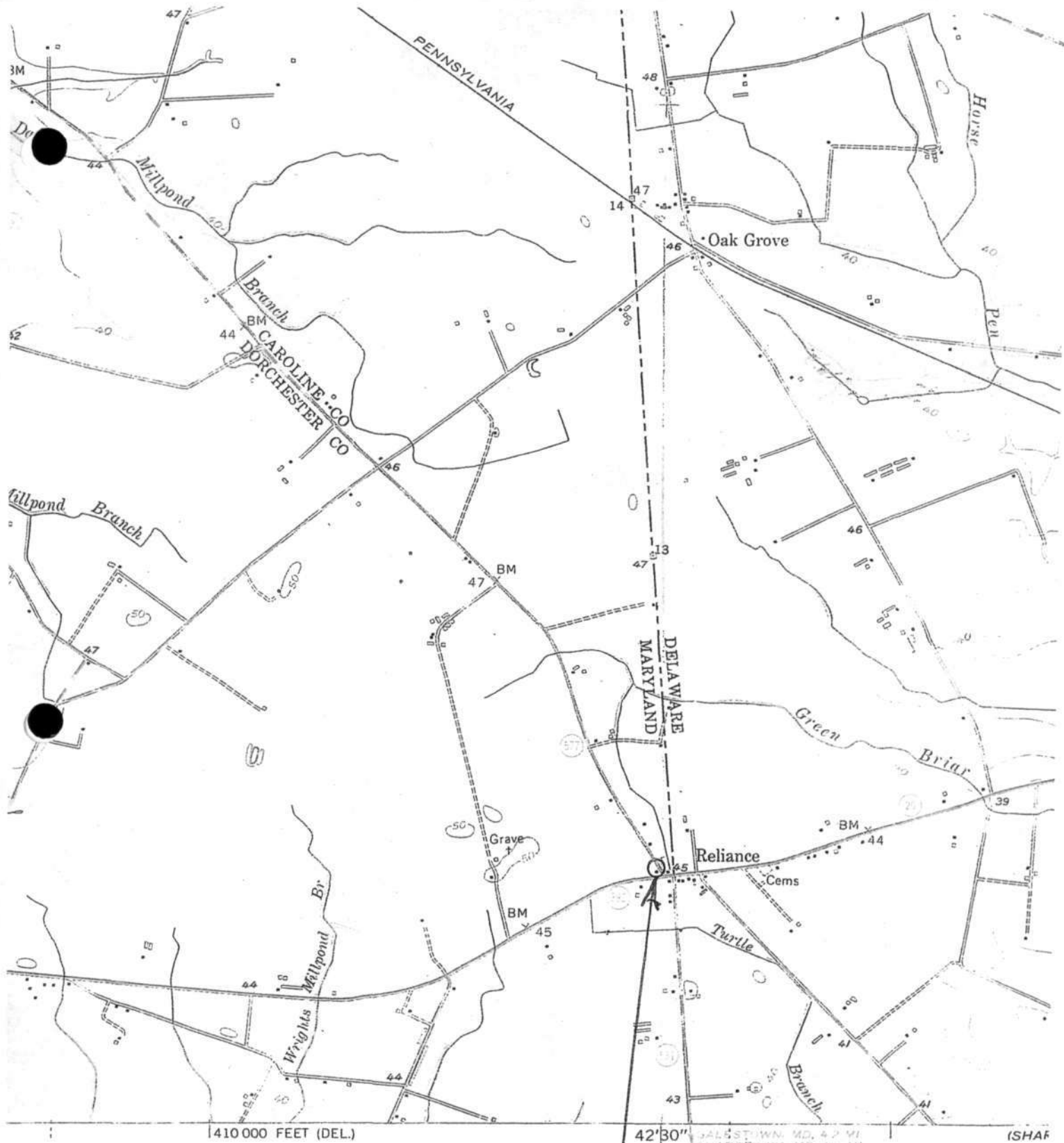
name/title	Paul B. Touart, Architectural Historian		
organization	Chesapeake Country Heritage & Preservation	date	10/21/08
street & number	P. O. Box 5	telephone	410-651-1094
city or town	Westover	state	Maryland 21871

The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

The survey and inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

return to:

Maryland Historical Trust
DHCD/DHCP
100 Community Place
Crownsville, MD 21032-2023
410-514-7600



and published by the Geological Survey

USC&GS

in part compiled from aerial photographs
raphy by planetable surveys 1955

1927 North American datum
used in Delaware and Maryland

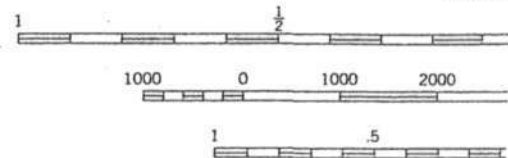
TRUE NORTH
MAGNETIC NORTH

APPROXIMATE MEAN
DECLINATION, 1955

D-125, Johnson's Tavern
Seaford West, Del.-Md. 1955

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NA
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGIC

SCALE



CONTOUR IN
FEET (10)



D-125

Joseph Janson's Tavern

Reliance, Dorchester Co., Md.

EAST ELEVATION

10/18, PAUL TONART, PITTSBURGH

W.F./MD. HISTORICAL TRUST

1/2



D-125

JOSEPH JOHNSON'S TAVERN

RELIANCE, DOACITESTON Co., MD.

WEST ELEVATION

7/08, PAUL TOWARD, PHOTOGRAPHER

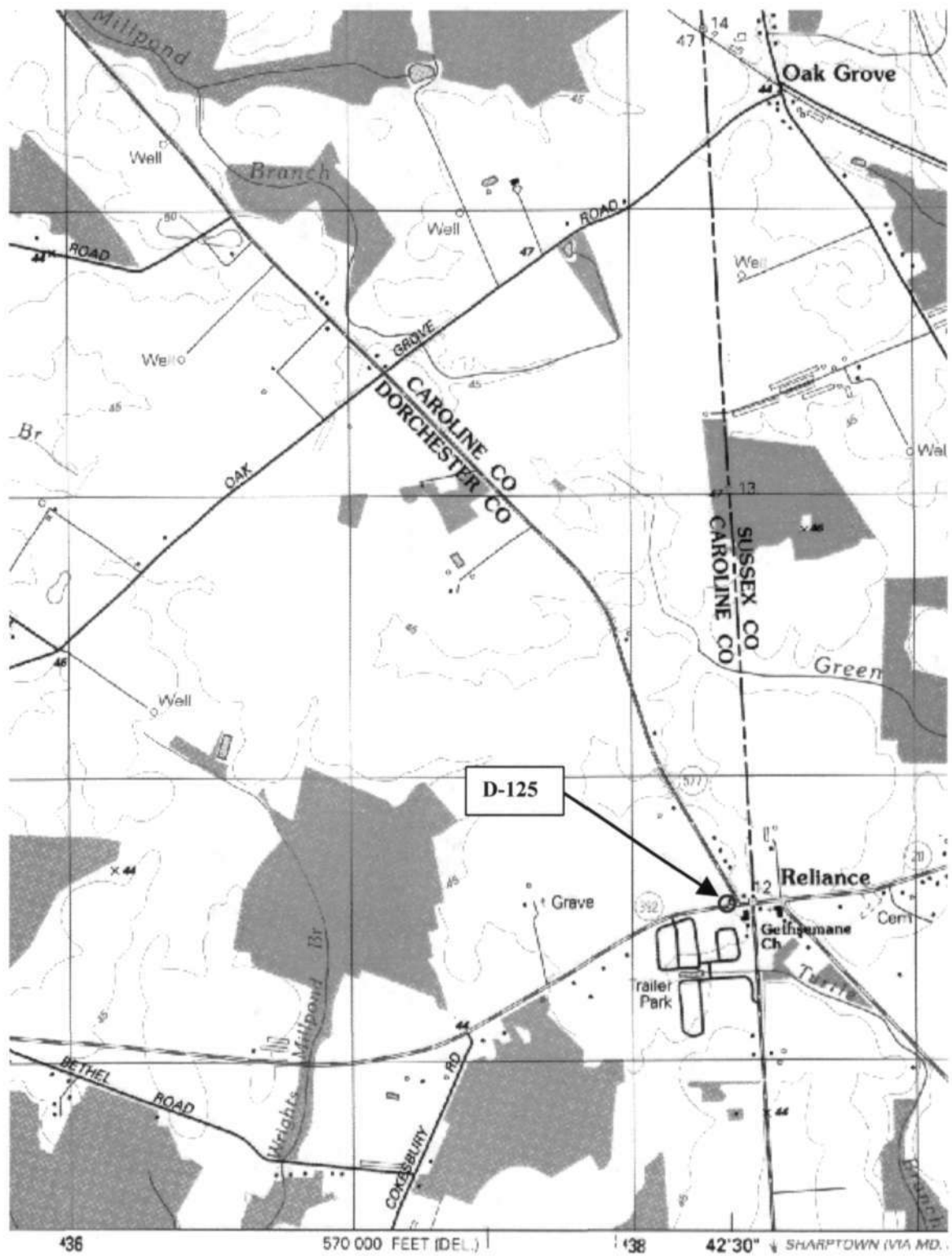
WET./MD. HISTORICAL TRUST

2/2

D-125 Johnsons' Cross Roads Tavern
Md. Rt. 392 and 577
Reliance, Maryland

Three Counties and two States come together at one point near Reliance, Maryland, home of the famous Patty Cannon. Joe Johnson, Patty's son-in-law, built a tavern at the crossroads. He and Patty Cannon were partners in the operation of the tavern. An old story tells of when travelers stopped at the tavern they were often robbed and murdered. This murder-for-profit combination found another sideline--the stealing and selling of Negro slaves. When slaves were kidnapped they were kept prisoner in the attic. When a buyer arrived, the slaves were taken down to the Nanticoke River, placed aboard a sailing vessel and shipped away. It is a legend in Dorchester County that the location of Patty Cannon's house, was a means for escaping arrest. When Maryland police officers arrived, she went across to Delaware and vice versa. However, Patty was arrested and died from self administered poison in jail at Georgetown, Delaware, before her trial. Today, the Patty Cannon House is marked with a historical marker.

D-125
Patty Cannon House
Finchville (MD 392) & Federalsburg Reliance Roads
Seaford West Quadrangle



D-125



Johnson's Crossroads Tavern

D-125

M. Bourne Nov 1975

.14 X 1.86

50%



D-125

Johnson's Crossroads Tavern